

Emergency Department Common Cold

General Information

A cold is an upper respiratory tract infection caused by a viral infection of the airway passages. The common cold usually causes a runny nose, nasal congestion, sneezing, watery eyes, sore throat, and /or cough. A slight fever may also develop. The symptoms of the common cold will usually resolve within a week, although some people continue to have symptoms (coughing, sneezing, congestion) for up to two weeks. Colds are caused by viruses; therefore, antibiotics are not useful for the treatment of the common cold. Unnecessary use of antibiotics can lead to adverse events such as allergic reactions, diarrhea, and the many side effects of antibiotics. Treatments for the cold are aimed at the relief of symptoms, but they do not shorten or cure the cold. Colds are often transmitted from person-to-person via hands. The virus can also be transmitted by touching a surface, sneezing, or coughing.

Prevention

- Avoid close contact with people who have a cold.
- Keep your hands away from your nose and mouth.
- Wash your hands often.
- When soap and water are not available, use alcohol based hand gels.
- Eat healthy foods.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Do not smoke.
- Do not share food and drinks.

Instructions

1. Wash your hands often, especially after you blow your nose. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze or cough. Discard used tissue in the garbage.
2. The symptoms of a cold will resolve over time, even without any treatment. You may take over-the-counter decongestants or cold remedies. Follow the drug label instructions or speak to the pharmacist about which medication is suitable for your symptoms. People with underlying medical conditions or those who are on multiple medications should speak with their family doctor or pharmacist before taking any additional medications to ensure that they are safe to use.
3. You may take acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin or Advil) for fever, aches and sweats.
4. Use a cool-mist humidifier (vaporizer) to increase air moisture. This will make it easier for you to breathe. **DO NOT** use hot steam.
5. Rest as much as possible and get plenty of sleep.
6. Drink plenty of clear fluids (8 glasses a day) such as water, fruit juice, tea, clear soups, and carbonated beverages.

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See your family doctor if you have:

- A cold that lasts longer than two to three weeks.

Return to Emergency if you:

- Are coughing up thick gray or bloody sputum.
- Have pain in your chest.
- Have persistent high fever not responsive to acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil)
- Have unusual shortness of breath.
- Have a severe headache and neck pain or stiffness.

For more information or questions contact the HealthLinkBC at 811.

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